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# *Egyptian Art*

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They tremble that behold the Nile in full flood.  
The fields laugh and the riverbanks are overflowed.  
The gods' offerings descend, the visage of men is bright,  
and the heart of the gods rejoiceth.

From the *Pyramid Texts*, ca.2600 B. C.

From the inundation of the great river, as it courses northward cutting a ribbon through the rainless desert, comes the yearly rebirth of Egypt. As early as the Middle Stone Age (ca.12,000 to 10,000 B.C.) primitive hunters camped by the edge of the Nile gorge and left their chipped-flint implements. With the development of Neolithic agriculture (ca.6000 B.C.) permanent settlers began to reclaim the swampy river lands and to control the waters through dikes and irrigation ditches. These people gradually formed organized agricultural communities with common customs and religious beliefs that were to become the inheritance of Egyptian civilization many centuries later. During the last phases of this era of prehistory, Egyptian culture seems to have been divided into two parts: a



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southern African culture and a northern Mediterranean one. Archeological discoveries in Upper (southern) Egypt have brought to light many examples of fine black-topped red pottery and burnished red vessels painted in white lines with geometric patterns and stylized animal forms (Plate 1). In the less isolated region of the Delta the pottery seems to have been more inventive, as exemplified by the buff-colored vase in the Cleveland Museum, painted with red designs of a Nile scene with ships bearing strange flags or emblems and bands of wavy lines (Plate 2).

Sometime around 3200 B.C. Menes, the legendary founder of the first Egyptian dynasty, forcibly united Upper and Lower Egypt into a single nation. From a simple prehistoric village culture Egypt rose suddenly to the full glory of a mature civilization. A hieroglyphic script came into use and records could be kept. A calendar was invented to calculate the time of the yearly inundations. Objects of gold, copper, ivory, wood, and stone were employed to enrich the sur-

roundings of Egyptian life. Over this newly-united land ruled an omnipotent god-king, the pharaoh, surrounded by an elite corps of priests and officials. This stable system of absolute central authority and efficient administration produced Egypt's classic age, the Old Kingdom (ca. 2780 to 2280 B.C.). It was during this period that the temper of Egyptian culture and religion was forged, to endure for the next 2000 years.

From remotest times the Egyptians had been concerned with the problems of life after death. Their belief in both spiritual and material survival led to the construction of magnificent tomb "houses" for the dead. With the development of stone architecture the eternal house of the pharaoh assumed the form of a gigantic pyramid. The largest of these tomb monuments, built in the Fourth Dynasty, are still today among the wonders of the world, symbolizing the tremendous power of the earthly, yet divine, beings who at death became united with the sun god Rā. Grouped around such royal tombs were the necropoli, cities of

Plate 2. Pottery jar,  
late predynastic period  
(4000-3200 B.C.).  
The John Huntington Collection.



Plate 1.  
Pottery jar and bowl,  
early predynastic period  
(4000-3200 B.C.).  
The John Huntington Collection.



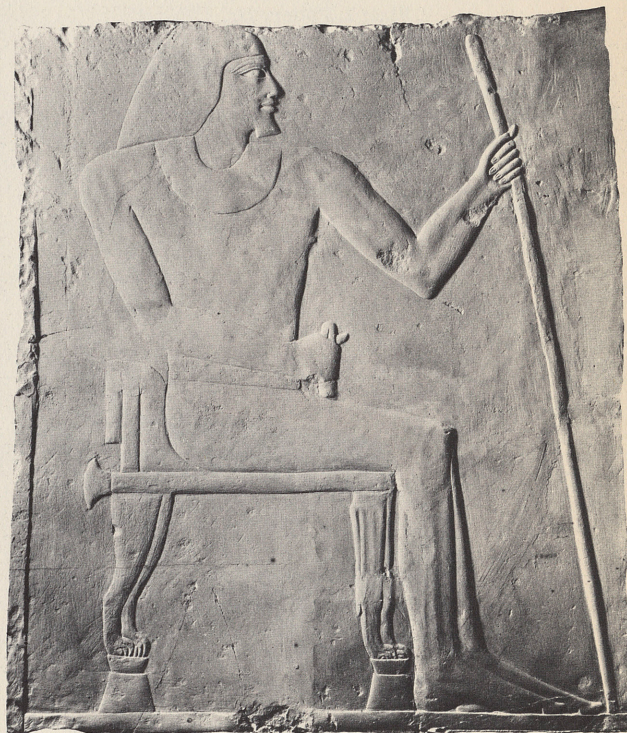


They ~~The~~ dead built for noblemen and various court officials and made up of low rectangular tombs called *mastabas*. Within a *mastaba* the body was carefully protected in a sealed burial chamber below the floor. Rooms above were arranged to contain the cherished objects and equipment of life, with a chamber for offerings made to the deceased. In the statue chamber of *serdab* the statues of the tomb's owner were placed. These images were made to preserve a magical effigy of the

LEFT. Plate 3. *Min-Nefer*, limestone, Old Kingdom, Fifth Dynasty (2565–2420 B.C.). Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund.

BELOW. Plate 4. *The Deceased Seated*, limestone relief from Sakkareh, Old Kingdom, Sixth Dynasty (2420–2285 B.C.). The John Huntington Collection, gift of Jacob Hirsch.

OPPOSITE. Plate 5. *Sowing and Harvesting of Flax*, limestone relief from Sakkareh, Old Kingdom, Sixth Dynasty (2420–2285 B.C.). The John Huntington Collection, gift of Jacob Hirsch.





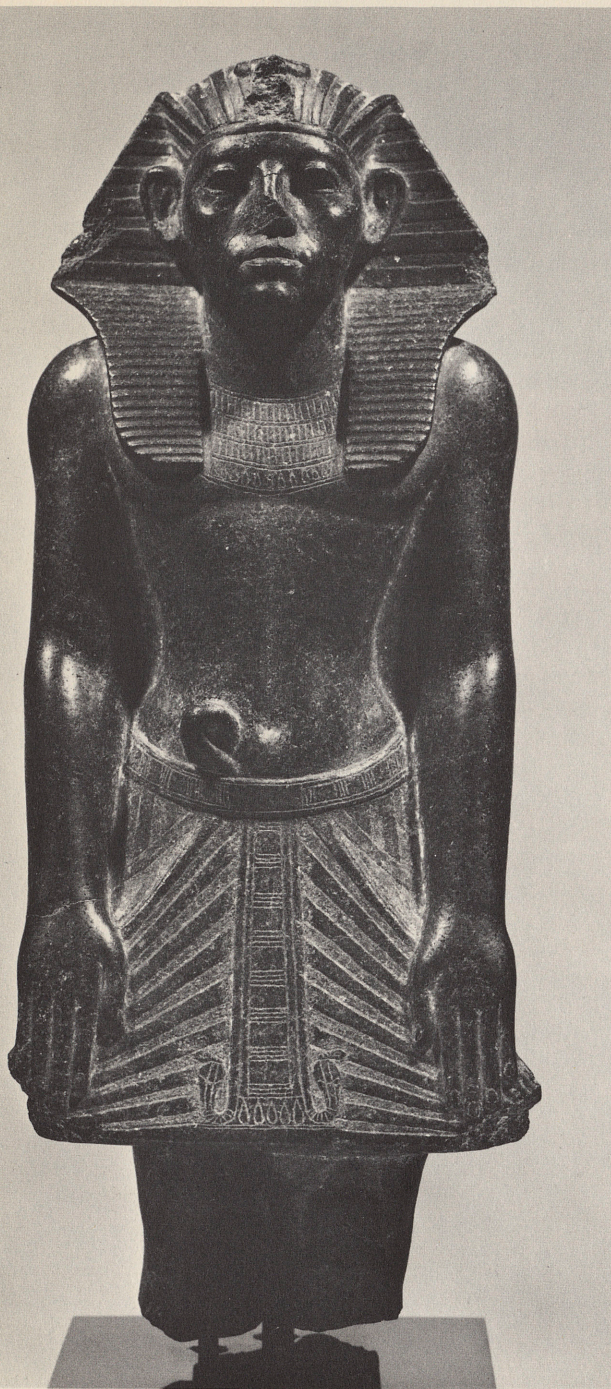
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deceased in case the mummified body was destroyed. A statuette in The Cleveland Museum of Art of the nobleman Min-Nefer, "overseer of the tenants of the court," dated to the Fifth Dynasty, was found in the *serdab* of a private tomb near Gizeh (Plate 3). This sculpture is typical in style of such works and reveals the rigid conventions of the Egyptian sculpture. The body forms a compact unit, braced with a rectangular support at the back, connected to a square base. The legs are in a stiff striding pose, and the arms are locked tightly to the sides with clenched fists. The standing figure is perfectly balanced in an absolute frontal pose; the expressionless head erect with eyes in an impassive gaze. Contrasts in textures were evolved through the patterns of the wig and the short kilt. On the walls of such tombs Egyptian artists made low-relief, painted scenes in horizontal registers to insure the continuance of an image of life for the deceased

in his dwelling. To one side of these scenes the dead person is usually shown on a much larger scale before offerings, while the scenes of familiar everyday life roll out beside him. The Cleveland Museum portrait of a nobleman in low relief represents this type of figure (Plate 4). He is seated on a chair, immobile yet watchful, wearing a short kilt, wig, and false beard indicating his noble status. According to the timeless Egyptian convention the body is made up of a composite of side-view legs and arms, and a front-view torso, with a profile head and front-view eye. Despite this visually-impossible combination of anatomical forms, the Egyptian sculptor, with his sure sense of line and sensitivity to delicate modulations of relief, has endowed the figure with a stark simplicity and austere grandeur. Elaborate agricultural scenes from the same tomb (Plate 5) depict the sowing and harvesting of flax. In the upper register slaves are seen







planting and plowing with oxen, while in the lower they reap the abundant grain and bind it in sheaves. Originally these reliefs were brightly painted, and traces of color may still be seen in some areas.

With the fall of the Sixth Dynasty the traditional political and social stability of the Old Kingdom came to an end. The era of dynasties Seven through Ten (2280–2052 B.C.), called the First Intermediate Period, was a time of troubles throughout the land. Feudal nobles rose to challenge the central power of the state, leaving the country disunited, with unprotected borders open to Asiatic peoples who made incursions into the Delta region. During this time of civil war and cultural impoverishment little art of any importance was produced.

The struggle of rival powers was finally ended in the Eleventh Dynasty under the rule of Thebes, which became Egypt's new capital. In this second great age, known as the Middle Kingdom (2134–1778 B.C.), unified rule was restored in an era of peace and prosperity that lasted throughout the reign of the powerful kings of the Twelfth Dynasty. The Cleveland Museum possesses an excellent portrait from this period of the pharaoh Amenhemat III (Plate 6). Unlike the serene, untroubled countenances of the Old Kingdom, we find in the visage of the king a startlingly-individualistic portrait of a man with a tragic, careworn expression. The eyes are deep set, the cheekbones prominent, and the mouth heavy and sullen. During the Twelfth Dynasty, for the first time we may gaze on the portrait of a pharaoh as an individual human being, who shows in his face the weight of his great responsibilities. These portrait heads, however, are invariably combined with the immobile, stylized body of a god.

At the close of the Twelfth Dynasty during the Second Intermediate Period (1778–1567 B.C.) the stability of Egyptian civilization again came to an end. Once more weak and divided, the fertile land fell easy prey to the Hyksos invaders who subjugated most of the country with their new weapon of the

Plate 6. *Amenhemat III* (reign: 1841–1792 B.C.), black Aswan granite, Middle Kingdom, Thirteenth Dynasty. Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund.



Plate 7. *Queen Hatshepsut* (reign: 1489–1469 B.C.), schist, New Kingdom, Eighteenth Dynasty. The John Huntington Collection.

horse-drawn chariot. During the late Seventeenth Dynasty, however, the local princes of Thebes succeeded in breaking the power of the foreign war lords, who were finally driven from their Delta stronghold at Avaris by the pharaoh Ahmose, who established the Eighteenth Dynasty.

The advent of the Eighteenth Dynasty ushered Egypt into her most brilliant age, that of the New Kingdom or Empire (1567–1080 B.C.). Militant pharaohs extended the borders of Egypt by conquest from the Euphrates in the East to Southern Nubia. This expansion brought not only booty and the tribute of subject peoples, but also new contacts for trade and foreign cultural influence. Thebes became a luxurious royal city with magnificent palaces, temples, and tombs. On the west side of the Nile, outside the city, a vast funeral temple was built by the widow of Thutmosis II, Queen Hatshepsut. In sculptural representation she had herself depicted in the male attire of a pharaoh. Her portraits, however, such as seen in Plate 7, show the delicate idealized features of this unusual feminine ruler. It is probable that the tradition created by the sculptors of Hatshepsut was largely responsible for giving the statuary of this age its elegant idealistic orientation.

By the end of the fifteenth century B.C. the pharaohs of the Eighteenth Dynasty had spread their conquests to their farthest extent, and Egypt was enjoying an unparalleled splendor of material culture. The pharaoh Amenhotep III who came to power at this time, unlike his predecessors, dedicated his peaceful reign to the pleasures of palace life. An impressive portrait of this king in the Cleveland Museum (Plate 8) shows the Eighteenth-dynasty sculptor's facility in transforming granite into a softly-molded face with almond eyes and sensuous smiling lips, articulated



Plate 8. *Amenhotep III* (reign: 1397–1360 B.C.), granite, New Kingdom, Eighteenth Dynasty. Gift of the Hanna Fund.





with the utmost delicacy and refinement. The sensitively-modelled head is crowned with a royal battle helmet, once colored azure blue. A second smaller portrait of the pharaoh executed in rose quartzite shows a more youthful countenance (Plate 9). Here Amenhotep wears an exquisitely-patterned wig attached to a solid block at the back, which once reinforced the whole sculpture of the figure. Although less commanding than the large granite head, this charming work shows a similar sensitive treatment of the features. A brilliantly-painted relief fragment (Plate 10) may be dated by its cartouches to the reign of Amenhotep III and serves as an illustration of the development of painting during the Eighteenth Dynasty. Here we see part of a procession of Nile gods representing the nomes of Egypt. Each figure, separated by a band of inscription, bears an offering of papyrus, lotus flowers, fruit, grain, and animals—the abundance of the great river. The rich, well-preserved colors—bright blues, yellows, reds, and greens—are

set off brilliantly against the white background, and every detail within the forms is rendered with the greatest precision in tiny decorative patterns.

The decade that followed the reign of Amenhotep III, called the Amarna Period, produced the strangest and most revolutionary style in the history of Egyptian art. This occurred during the reign of Amenhotep's son, Amenhotep IV, who was fanatically devoted to a new religious cult dedicated to the all-embracing power of the sun as a single omnipotent deity, represented by the Aten, a solar disc with many rays ending in hands. The young king with his wife Nofretete and his followers abandoned Thebes, seat of Egypt's old gods, and founded a splendid new capital at modern Tell-el-Amarna. This mystical ruler, who changed his name to Akhenaten, vigorously promoted the new monotheistic Aten worship and ruthlessly suppressed older established cults. The abrupt change in the official religion of Egypt brought about a reaction against many of the old artistic tra-





OPPOSITE. Plate 10. *Three Nile Gods Bearing Offerings*, limestone relief with polychrome, New Kingdom, Eighteenth Dynasty, reign of Amenhotep III (1397–1360 B.C.). The John L. Severence Fund.

ABOVE. Plate 11. *Scene of Homage*, sandstone relief, New Kingdom, Eighteenth Dynasty, early part of the reign of Akhenaten (Ikhnaton) (1370–1353 B.C.). Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund.

RIGHT. Plate 9. *Amenhotep III* (reign: 1397–1360 B.C.), rose quartzite, New Kingdom, Eighteenth Dynasty. Purchase, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Bequest.

ditions as well. Amarna art, under the influence of Akhenaten's Aten religion with its great respect for the forces of nature, shows a marked relaxation of convention and a tendency toward informality and free imitation of nature. This striking artistic transformation is aptly illustrated by a sandstone relief fragment of a scene of homage from the early part of Akhenaten's reign (Plate 11). The figures, no longer rigidly set, are bunched in an overlapping group. The variety and naturalness of their poses show how profoundly the artist had broken with traditional conventions. In the portraiture of the royal family the





Plate 13. *Head of Nofretete*, sandstone relief,  
New Kingdom, Eighteenth Dynasty, early part  
of the reign of Akhenaten (Ikhнатon) (1370–1353 B.C.).  
Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund.

Plate 14. *The Nobleman Amenhotep and His Family*,  
limestone relief from a tomb near Assiut, New Kingdom,  
Nineteenth Dynasty, reign of Ramesses II (1290–1223 B.C.),  
Purchase, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Bequest.







emphasis of individual physical peculiarities, particularly those of the pharaoh, resulted in images that sometimes border on caricature, as seen in two fragments of incised sandstone relief. The first (Plate 12—on cover), perhaps the pharaoh, seems to have been represented as either worshipping the Aten or basking in its glory, since one of its rays ending in a hand is depicted behind his head. In this relief portrait the neck is long and spindly and the profile has Akhenaten's long nose, hanging jaw, and thick lips. The other fragment, the profile of Nofretete the queen, shows similar harsh characteristics (Plate 13).

This peculiar style, which vacillated from astonishing realism to mannered exaggeration, did not long outlive Akhenaten and his artificially-imposed religion. Within a few years of the heretic pharaoh's death, the old cults once more regained power, and the young pharaoh, Tutankhamen, returned to Thebes and orthodoxy.

The Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties are known as the Ramesside Period because of the number of pharaohs in both dynasties by the name of Ramesses. Although the innovations of the Amarna Period were still occasionally manifest in the art of that era, a technically brilliant but sterile style set in which copied faithfully the time-honored formulae of Egyptian art, but lacked innate vitality and creativity. This style in sculpture and painting was proliferated in the grandiose monuments erected by the pharaohs of the period. Tomb decoration, which in the Eighteenth Dynasty featured lively scenes of earthly life and pleasures, had for the most part been replaced by tedious ritual scenes taken from funerary texts. Occasionally, however, in these works we do find a sense of real creative vigor. A tomb relief of outstanding quality from the region of Assiut, now in the Cleveland Museum, dates from the reign of Ramesses II (Plate 14). Here the artist has depicted



with great delicacy and restraint a procession of a nobleman and his family with arms raised in adoration, wearing clinging diaphanous garments of pleated linen.

The Cleveland Museum possesses a sarcophagus of the late period (Twenty-second Dynasty) which is of interest both artistically and historically (Plate 15). It shows the complex decorative schemes of an age-old funerary art painted on both exterior and interior surfaces. The sarcophagus once belonged to a priest named Beken'mut who before his death carefully chose the scenes to be represented on it. These pictures of gods and offerings had the function of protecting the dead and showing his piety before the deities who were to judge him in the next world. On the central part of the inside back panel there is a large Osirid figure (Plate 16) of the Eighteenth-dynasty pharaoh, Thutmosis III, probably placed in a central position because the priest had protected or preserved the mummy of the former king from tomb

robbers. This would undoubtedly have been considered a meritorious deed which would be of great value in securing a good position in the afterlife. To one side of pharaoh's image is a kneeling priest, possibly Beken'mut himself.

Although Egypt in the first millenium B.C. was subject to internal dissension, foreign conquest, and a subsequent decline in power, there still appeared some works of art of high quality. Artists of this period consciously sought to revive ancient styles, to resuscitate the grandeur and power of an Egypt that was lost forever. The last burst of activity in Egyptian art occurred with the invasion of the Kushite kings from the South who formed the Twenty-fifth Dynasty (730-663 B.C.). After a brief occupation by the Assyrians this continued in the Twenty-sixth Dynasty under the Saite rulers from the city of Sais in the Delta. An important official in this turbulent period was Mentuemhat, governor of Upper Egypt, who left more than a dozen statues of himself and an

Plate 15.  
*Coffin of the Priest Beken'mut,*  
late period, Twenty-second Dynasty  
(950-730 B.C.).  
The John Huntington Collection.

OPPOSITE. Plate 16.  
Detail of the interior  
of the *Coffin of Beken'mut.*









Plate 17. *Adoring Nobleman in Sacerdotal Vestments*, limestone relief from the tomb of Mentuemhat (died ca.660 B.C.) at Thebes, late period, early Twenty-sixth Dynasty. Gift of the Hanna Fund.



extensive rock-cut tomb at Thebes, which contained some of the finest examples of art at the time. The Cleveland Museum is fortunate to have a number of fragmentary reliefs from Mentuemhat's tomb. One imposing sunken relief (Plate 17) represents the deceased standing, with arms raised in adoration. He wears the sacerdotal garments of a priest and a richly-carved wig with exquisitely-modelled locks. The hieroglyphic inscription surrounding the figure was carefully drawn in red outline, but was never carved. Another relief scene (Plate 18) depicts boats of mourning women, with great delicacy and a strongly decorative effect.

A third of these well-preserved reliefs, which still

OPPOSITE. Plate 18. *Boat of Mourners*, limestone relief from the tomb of Mentuemhat at Thebes. Gift of the Hanna Fund.

BELOW. Plate 19. Fragment of a fishing scene, limestone relief from the tomb of Mentuemhat at Thebes. Gift of the Hanna Fund.





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retains some of its original polychromy, is a fragment of a fishing scene showing a pair of fish in the river impaled on the tips of harpoons against a background of stylized papyrus (Plate 19). The flat wedge that rises directly behind the fish indicates water, in accordance with the age-old two-dimensional stylization of Egyptian art.

Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in 332 B.C., bringing a new wave of cultural influence across the Mediterranean. After his death, Ptolemy, one of his generals, became ruler of Egypt and founded a dynasty which lasted until the death of Cleopatra VII, and the Roman occupation of 30 B.C. The Museum possesses a splendid example of sculpture from this

era in the torso of a Ptolemaic general, Amun-pe-yom (Plate 20, overleaf), a provincial governor between 280 and 250 B.C. Although the granite figure was conceived within the ancient tradition in an erect striding pose with supporting block at the back, the chest is deep and powerfully modelled, revealing the influence of Greek sculptural tradition.

The gradual inroads of classical style led at last to the final decay of Egyptian style. At newly-founded Alexandria the cosmopolitan Greco-Roman world dominated in culture and art. Only in the crude provincial art of the common people did the old ways linger to become several centuries later an element in the Coptic art of Christian Egypt.





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Plate 20. *Amun-pe-yom*,  
granite, early Ptolemaic Period  
(ca.280–250 B.C.).  
Gift of the Hanna Fund.

FRONT COVER. Plate 12.  
*Head of Akhenaten* (Ikhnaton),  
sandstone relief, New Kingdom,  
Eighteenth Dynasty, early part of  
the reign of Akhenaten (1370–1353 B.C.).  
Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund.

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